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SERMON LXXIX.

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GOD ENTITLED TO OUR OBEDIENCE.

Exod. v. 2.—*Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice?*

THIS impious question was uttered by that haughty monarch, who, after cruelly enslaving the people of God, refused to release them at his command. The interrogation is equivalent to the boldest assertion, that the Lord is not a Being of such greatness and excellency as to deserve the obedience of man. At least the king of Egypt wished to excuse himself; and he spoke the heart of every sinner. In thus confidently addressing Moses, he doubtless expected to awe him into silence; and so to escape any decisive reply. But that omnipotent Being, whose authority was disputed, came forth in terrible majesty, and took the answer upon himself. Pharaoh trembled at the plagues, which manifested a power infinitely superior to his own; and so long as the vindictive hand of God was upon him, he felt himself to be a creature. But not repenting of his impiety, while he shuddered at its punishment, he was left to that presumption which issued in his ruin.

Although comparatively few are so bold as to repeat the question, which God answered in so awful a manner, yet the sentiment which it avows is continually echoed by the conduct of sinners. Indeed, all sin proclaims the principle, that there is no God worthy to be obeyed. Else why is he ever disobeyed? But impenitent sinners would justify themselves in disobedience. Hence we read, "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God." This sentiment has been cherished in every past generation. But the fool of modern times advances boldly beyond his more timid predecessors; and what they dared to think, he dares to speak. In almost all nations now called Christian, there are those who not only refuse to obey the commands of God, but make sport of his perfections and deny his being. Sin is in itself a principle of atheism, and these refiners in iniquity carry it through. "No God" is the language of their hearts, and the principle of their daily practice; and with

dreadful consistency, some have registered it as a maxim of their philosophy. But professed atheists only display the tendency of that sinful nature, which is common to us all. "*Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice?*" is the practical question of *all* who do not live, by evangelical faith, that life which God requires, and which is the only acceptable acknowledgment of his being and perfections. This question I shall attempt to answer by a general exhibition of *the divine claims to our obedience.*

In the *first* place, then, we ought to obey God, *because he is the benevolent Creator of the universe.* If he had done nothing to reveal himself, we could have had no knowledge of his character and existence. "No man hath seen God at any time." It belongs to him alone to commune directly with himself, and to behold without a glass his own perfections. It is, however, the nature of infinite goodness, to reveal, to communicate, and glorify itself. It was the eternal purpose of God to make himself known to intelligent creatures, endued with capacities to obey and enjoy him. This most glorious design he began to execute, with consummate wisdom, in the work of creation. And in view of his creation, it would seem as though every intelligent man would devoutly exclaim,

"These are thy glorious works, Parent of good,
Almighty! thine this universal frame,
Thus wondrous fair, thyself how wondrous then?"

But there is in man a strange propensity to overlook God in the very things by which he invites our notice. We behold his works with a kind of habitual atheism; we call them the works of nature; and in the very effects we lose sight of the Cause. To realize the manifestation of Deity which there is in creation, we must detach our thoughts from the established order of things, and imagine ourselves the spectators of their first production by divine power. Suppose this moment the beginning of time. Conceive the earth just coming forth, a mighty mass without form and void, and darkness brooding upon the face of the deep. Listen to the creative voice, *Let there be light*, and see it instantly break forth to enlighten the unfinished world. Behold the waters gathering into seas and oceans, the earth consolidating, and the grass, herbage, and trees rising in beauty upon its surface. Behold the unnumbered animals, as they come into existence, all instinctively choosing their appointed elements; some the water, some the air, some the earth. Mark the sun and the moon taking their appointed stations in the heavens. Survey the countless stars arranging themselves at suitable distances in the immensity of space, where the earth itself with all its lands and waters is but a point. See the whole system of creation advancing into order by de-

grees, till every part becomes complete, and, at the all-commanding word, behold, at length, the vast machinery begin to move. Not a single plant interferes with its neighbor—no discordant note interrupts the harmony of the spheres. Well might the great Creator look with pleasure on his works, and pronounce them *good*. But the most distinguished and most important creature is yet to be produced. "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." To give greater distinction to the nature of man, the mode of divine operation is now changed. Things in general were brought into existence by a word. God said, let them be, and they were. But when *man* was to be produced, the Almighty for the first time put forth his forming *hand*, and with his *own breath* inspired that rational life, which was to bear his image. "The Lord formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul. And God blessed them, and said unto them, have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowls of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." Thus all things in earth, air, and ocean were for the use of man, and the chief end of man was to glorify and enjoy his Maker. And could any thing ever cancel the obligations thus conferred upon man by his bountiful Creator?

Secondly; We are bound to obey God, *because he is the constant Preserver of the creatures of his power*. We are apt to think that little of the divine energy is necessary to keep the world in being after its first creation. But we ought to remember, that there is no sufficiency in created existence to continue itself. Accordingly, when the Psalmist takes a survey of the creatures of God, he devoutly acknowledges their unremitted and entire dependence. "These wait all upon thee, that thou mayest give them their meat in due season. That thou gavest them they gather. Thou openest thine hand, they are filled with good. Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled. Thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust. Thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created, and thou renewest the face of the earth." It requires, every moment, the same omnipotence to preserve the universe which was displayed in producing it. And by proper attention we shall find that the perfections of God shine to more advantage in preservation, than in creation. It is by no means so difficult to make an advance, as it is to support it. After any great exertion, finite beings need rest, and whatever requires unremitting energy is to them attended with insuperable difficulty. Were it not for the continued exercise of divine power in preserving the universe, we might have some reason to conclude, that its Maker had exhausted himself in its creation. But God is now rising before his creatures every moment, and ever multiplying the proofs of his infinite greatness. At this late period of the world, every century, every day, every instant of past time is a distinct evidence that the Creator's re-

sources are altogether inexhaustible ; that all possibilities are equally easy with him ; and that he is infinitely able to carry into complete effect that stupendous plan of the universe, which none but himself could devise and put in operation. Infinitely above all finite comprehension must he be, who for thousands of years sustains the vast system of worlds, without being in the least degree burthened by the weighty charge. And, when we reflect upon the innumerable multitudes of intelligent beings, all depending for support upon the kind Father of their spirits, we have convincing evidence that there is One in existence, whom giving doth not impoverish, nor withholding make rich ; and who accounts it more blessed to give than to receive. If then the Creator of the universe is entitled to obedience, he has still higher claims when contemplated as the faithful and Almighty Preserver.

But, *thirdly*, we are under yet greater obligations to obey God, *because he is the perfect Governor of the universe*. We are wisely placed under a law, which at once declares the true end of our existence, and our duty to pursue it invariably. There is in the nature of an intelligent mind a sense of obligation, giving the sanction of conscience to the commands of God. These are so benevolent in their tendency, that he who breaks them strikes at the root of his own best happiness. To obey God is to participate in his blessedness. But mere laws, whether divine or human, are but feeble cords. Nothing but the universal influence of the supreme Governor can so order events, as to fulfil his wise and eternal purposes. The effectual direction of the great first Cause is necessary every moment so to produce, to arrange, and control the operations of second causes, as that the universe shall answer the end of its creation. It is not in the seasons to cause their own revolutions ; it is not in the earth to continue itself in its appointed sphere ; it is not in the stars to regulate their courses ; " the way of man is not in himself,—it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps."

Both the natural and moral worlds depend as entirely upon God for their daily direction, as for their first and constant existence. That which is dependent for its being can never become independent in any of its movements ; and nothing can create itself, or spring into existence without a cause. We may, also, be sure that God will not suffer any thing to have place under his wise dominion, but what he designs to render conducive to the best good of his kingdom. In doing otherwise he would deny himself. Let it not be imagined, from the sin and misery which have prevailed in the world, that God has forgotten to regulate his own affairs, or descended from the throne of universal government. Let us not suppose that chance has interfered with his benevolent purposes, or that Satan has wrested from his hands the sceptre and the reins. Let us not indulge the thought, that even sin itself has broken in upon the

divine system by surprise, and stolen an influence which God could not prevent. This is to make the sinner omnipotent and God an impotent, disappointed Being, attacked and overcome in an unguarded hour, or else conquered in his full strength and vigilance. This would plunge us into the abyss of atheism. Let us rather believe, as the Bible teaches, that "the Lord hath made all things for himself; yea, even the wicked for the day of evil;" and that moral as well as natural evil will be made the instrument of good in his hand, who can accomplish his gracious purposes by the most unpromising means, and bring glory to himself and advantage to the universe from the very things which seem to threaten the destruction of both. It displays only a false regard to the honor of God, to deny his agency where he himself directly asserts it, and calls us to acknowledge it with submission and confidence. If evil has come into the world without any other superintendency than that of chance, we have reason to tremble, lest it should prove an eternal disadvantage to God's kingdom. But, if the wisest, purest, and best of beings has had the supreme control of all events, we may be certain that its existence will in some way or other be made a benefit to the universe, notwithstanding its dreadful tendency to the contrary, and notwithstanding the sinner designs only evil, and is therefore verily guilty. He, who first caused light to shine out of darkness, will also bring good out of evil; making even the wrath of man to praise him, and wisely restraining the remainder thereof; so that nothing shall take place from the beginning to the end of time, but what shall, on the whole, be made to promote the best good of his kingdom. Thus the government of God is in the strictest sense perfect, and most amply entitles him to universal obedience.

Fourthly; We are obligated in the highest degree to obey God, *because he is the merciful Redeemer of sinners*. To save from eternal death guilty creatures, not only without injury, but with real advantage to that broken law which condemns them, and that divine authority, which they have treated with contempt; to change their rebellious hearts and bring them to repentance and cheerful obedience, to forgive their sins, without affording the least countenance to sinners, and finally to introduce them into the kingdom of heaven in a way glorious to the justice, holiness, and majesty of Him who sits upon the throne, is a work which displays the all-sufficiency of God, unspeakably more than the creation, preservation, and government of the whole universe. In the salvation of sinners there were obstacles to be surmounted of a very peculiar nature. How shall the righteous Enemy of sin take the part of its miserable subjects? How shall he, who has said, "the soul that sinneth, it shall die," maintain his consistency, and yet reverse the sentence of death? How shall the enemies of God be admitted to his gracious presence? How shall those, who have opposed themselves to his perfections and government, be brought to harmonize with them, and be qualified to enjoy the bliss of

heaven? If the conduct of God himself had not given the answer to these inquiries, they would have remained unanswerable for ever. The redemption of men is so glorious a work, that it would eclipse all the other operations of Deity, did it not confer new lustre upon them, as the wisest and best preparation for this matchless display of divine glory. It now appears, that God was determined, "before the foundation of the world," to make manifest his infinite perfections to the best possible advantage in the great work of redemption. With this gracious intention he created the world, and has ever since continued it in being under his wise government; overruling all its events, even the most dark and dreadful, from the fall of man to the crucifixion of Christ, in such a manner as to secure the best opportunity of glorifying himself in the salvation of the lost. Here the darkness begins to be dispersed, which, to the eye of man, had so long enveloped the general scope of Providence. The human mind has been in much perplexity concerning the mysterious course of divine government; and the question has been repeated in every age, Why is the world so full of sin and misery, if its supreme Governor is infinitely powerful, wise, and good? On this formidable objection infidelity has founded its system, and atheism erected its fortress. But the difficulty is removed, the objection is taken away by the glorious Redeemer; and both the infidel and atheist are left without refuge. It was needful, that there should be clouds for the Sun of righteousness to dissipate, or he could never appear in his all-conquering and resplendent glory. As it is the established order in the natural system for the night to precede the day, so it is in the moral system for darkness to go before light. There must have been first a sinful, ruined world, which needed salvation, before God could possibly display his eternal mercy in its undeserved redemption. If man had been kept from falling, woful as his fall was, God could not have glorified himself in his recovery, pardon, and salvation. The most illustrious display of unbounded goodness depended upon that sovereign disposal of a righteous God, under which sin and misery have been permitted to take place. For pardon could be offered and mercy displayed to none but sinners. It was for God to determine whether sin should be permitted to enter Paradise or not. He was infinitely able to prevent it. He could have kept the tempter at an eternal distance from our first parents, or he could have strengthened them in the moment of temptation, and disappointed the adversary. But he thought it better, on the whole, that the temptation should be suffered to prevail. Though Satan meant it for evil, yet God in his holy providence meant it for good; intending to secure more glory in man's recovery, than it would have been to have kept him from falling. While, therefore, we are supremely concerned to hate sin as God hates it, let us adore the infinite wisdom of his sove-

reignty in so ordering the train of events as to display most fully his opposition to sin by his just treatment of it, his infinite power over it, and his unabated good-will and compassion to its miserable subjects.

To behold the divine character in its real glory is the most consummate blessedness of intelligent beings. That plan of operations, therefore, by which God can most fully display himself, is unspeakably the most perfect. Infinite Wisdom has adopted it, and its full accomplishment is rapidly advancing. The increase of happiness, which the universe is to receive from the redemption and salvation of sinners, is evinced by the joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance: and if the angels thus rejoice, what must be the blessedness of the redeemed themselves, when safely arrived in glory? How does the mariner, who has seen the heavens gathering blackness over him, and the ocean beneath swelling into mountains, and ready to overwhelm him—how does *he* enjoy the change, when the winds are hushed, and the sun looks forth without a cloud. What, then, must be the sensations of one, who, after feeling the guilt of sin, and danger of eternal wrath, finds himself in heaven, at the right hand of God, where sin and sorrow never enter?

Let it not be objected against the work of redemption, that all do not partake in its benefits. The atonement is sufficient for all, and the free offer of salvation is universal. And if God in a sovereign manner graciously inclines some to accept his mercy, and yet leaves others to perish in their obduracy, he wrongs no man. The destruction of impenitent sinners is, indeed, a great, but a deserved evil; and we are very unsuitable judges, whether it may not finally be necessary for the general good. But, when we are told that all will not be saved, we may be *certain* it is not best that all should be. For infinite power, wisdom, and goodness can make no mistake. It appears also highly reasonable that the ill-desert of sin should be thus strikingly manifested to the universe, in the punishment of the incorrigible sinner, as well as in the sufferings of the Savior. God thus reveals himself in the work of redemption, as a just God and a Savior, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and yet by no means clearing the guilty and impenitent.

From this general view of the character and works of God, we infer, in the first place, the greatness of our obligations to love and obey him with all the heart. If God is to be regarded at all, he is to be regarded supremely. If he deserves any place in our affections, he merits the first place. To give him any other than our supreme love is utterly impossible. We love him as God, or we do not love him at all. We give him the throne, or we wholly dethrone him in our souls. To render him a grudging homage from the natural principle of self-preservation, is no acknowledgment of his glorious perfections, nor any compliance with our high

obligations. We must therefore give him the throne of our hearts and the service of our lives.

It may be inferred, in the second place, from the infinite excellency of the divine character, that to be destitute of the love of God is to possess a heart entirely depraved. Whatever is worthy of love in moral beings is derived from the Source of all moral excellence. The goodness of creatures is but an emanation of the Divine goodness. Those, therefore, can have no true regard to real moral excellence, who do not love it in God. Their love to men must be of a partial and interested nature. It is generally admitted that love to God constitutes essentially a good man. But how many there are who call themselves good, and yet seem to live year after year without God in the world. Do such persons realize, that not to love God and enjoy communion with him, is to be without religion? Do they lay it suitably to heart, that, if they had any holy affections, they would find an object of delight in God? Do they consider, that nothing but entire depravity can account for their want of love to the supreme Excellency? A conviction of this humiliating truth should now alarm them. They should see themselves to be unworthy of any enjoyment, while unable to find it in God, the Source of all blessedness.

Let me then exhort the impenitent; *Be ye reconciled to God.* He has graciously set on foot a plan of reconciliation through the mediation of his Son Jesus Christ; offering pardon and blessedness to all who will renounce their opposition and become his friends. There is every possible motive to immediate compliance with this overture. We must either comply, or, by obstinately rejecting it, widen the distance between God and ourselves, and render it eternal. God cannot make a more benevolent offer. He invites us to become his friends, and upon that condition engages to befriend us throughout eternity. He opens before us all the sources of pleasure which heaven contains, and urges us to take freely. He promises as large a share of blessedness to every one of his friends as their capacity will admit. Nor is this all; he engages to enlarge their powers of enjoyment with a perpetual increase. Who can imagine to what heights of blessedness man may be raised by that Almighty Being, who created worlds and upholds them in existence? All that God can do to make us happy, will certainly be done, if we obey him. But, on the contrary, if we continue disobedient, all his perfections are of necessity arrayed against us. God is no neutral character, and he acknowledges no neutrality in any other being. Those who are not his friends he ranks among his enemies, and with them he fixes their eternal portion. His glory is displayed by the punishment of his enemies, as well as by the happiness of his friends. And how totally beyond conception must be the wretchedness of those on whom God shall

pour out his wrath, without mixture and without end. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was but a faint representation of that eternal destruction which awaits the impenitent. To be imprisoned for ever among the enemies of God and of universal being, where no tear is shed in compassion for the general misery, where enmity is the reigning temper, and mutual vexation the only employment—this alone is dreadful enough; but to have the omnipotent God for your eternal enemy—who can think of it without horror? Who, then, that hears me will remain another moment at enmity with Him.—breathing out hatred against his holy sovereignty? That moment may be fatal. “*Now, then—as though God did beseech you by us—we pray you, in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.*”

SERMON LXXX.

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FATAL HINDRANCE TO PRAYER.

Ps. LXVI. 18.—*If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.*

THERE is no subject on which the Prophets and Apostles speak with more earnestness and decision, than on *the necessity of holiness*. They inform us that God, who is himself infinitely holy, has given us a law, requiring every thing that is virtuous and pure, and forbidding every thing sinful; and that he will, by the most unequivocal acts of his government, show his love of the one, and his hatred of the other. And when they come to treat of the infinite mercy of God in redemption, of the grace which superabounds where sin hath abounded, they still set forth the holiness of God, and the necessity of holiness in man. They teach, that although God will save *sinners*, he will give no encouragement to *sin*; that the whole work of redemption is intended to promote moral purity,—to establish a kingdom of holiness. Such, evidently, is the plan of Divine Wisdom in this work, that the greater the number and the guilt of those who are saved, the more fully will the evil of sin be exposed, and the more illustriously will divine purity be displayed.

The sentiment, *that God is holy and cannot look upon sin*, was deeply impressed upon the mind of David. It was a truth familiar to his thoughts, that, although God was so much inclined to hear prayer, and to grant the desires of all who call upon him, he would have no favorable intercourse

with those who lived in sin. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." If I look upon sin with desire,—if I love it,—if I allow myself to commit it,—if I am reluctant to part with it,—a holy God will be displeased, and will have no friendly communication with me; and the prayers which I may offer up will be an abomination in his sight.

That God will not hear the prayer of those who regard iniquity in their hearts, is made very evident *from the infallible instructions of holy writ.* "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord; but the prayer of the upright is his delight." "The Lord is far from the wicked; but he heareth the prayer of the righteous." "He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination." These texts, and various others which might be quoted, plainly teach, that God cannot show such favor to those who live in sin, as to hear their prayers; that this token of his kindness and complacency can be granted to those only who forsake sin, and live in holy obedience. How tremendous was the declaration of God to the wicked Israelites in the time of Isaiah. After telling them, that their sacrifices, and their days of devotion, and all their outward observances were loathsome to him, he adds, "Yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear." He then proceeds to tell them what they must do to be heard and accepted: "Wash you; make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well." The same is taught in the New Testament. I shall cite only one passage; "Beloved, if our hearts condemn us not," (that is, for allowed sin,) "then have we confidence towards God. And whatsoever we ask we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do the things which are pleasing in his sight." Here the Apostle represents it as a well known and certain truth, that God's hearing prayer was a proof of his approbation, and that none could enjoy this who did not keep his commands.

The same truth may be deduced from a consideration of the known *attributes of God.* It would be manifestly inconsistent with our best views of the infinite *benevolence and wisdom* of God, to suppose that he will show such favor to unrepenting sinners, as to hear their prayers. Being infinitely benevolent, he desires and seeks the happiness of intelligent creatures. In the exercise of his infinite wisdom, he determines, that the only way to promote their happiness permanently, and in the highest degree, is, to maintain a *moral government.* In this government there must be *law.* Those who obey, must receive marks of divine favor; and those who disobey, marks of divine displeasure. The very nature of law implies this. Now can it be, that God, who possesses such a character, and has published such a law, will hear the prayers of those who regard iniquity in their hearts, and thus bestow upon them

the same marks of approbation, as upon the obedient? Should he do this, he would utterly destroy the distinction between the obedient and the disobedient, and would in this way subvert those principles of moral government which his infinite wisdom and goodness have established.

There is another way of coming to the same conclusion. God cannot approve of that which is opposite to his infinite benevolence; and he cannot show approbation, when he feels disapprobation. But if he should hear the prayers of the impenitent, he would show approbation of that temper of mind which is directly opposite to his benevolence, and which therefore he must for ever disapprove and condemn.

It might also be made to appear, that other attributes of God forbid the expectation that he will hear those who regard iniquity in their hearts. His *justice* forbids this; as it requires that men should be treated according to their character. His *truth* forbids it; because he has expressly declared that he will not hear impenitent sinners. In a word; all his perfections must prevent him from hearing the prayers of those who indulge the love of sin.

The doctrine which I have thus briefly established, is essential to the Christian religion, and has a direct bearing upon various subjects of high practical importance.

In the *FIRST* place, it exposes, in clear daylight, *the falsity of every scheme of religion which stands in opposition to the divine law, or in any way detracts from its authority and influence.* Against such a scheme, in every form and degree, the doctrine contained in our text, and indeed the whole Gospel, sets itself in array. I cannot enlarge on this particular view of the subject; and must content myself with a few suggestions addressed directly to the conscience.

If, then, there is any one, whether older or younger, who encourages himself in disobedience to God, because he hopes for pardon;—any one, who is less impressed with the authority of the divine law, because Christ died to redeem us from its curse;—any one, who can live quietly in the neglect of duty, because he thinks he has believed in Christ; finally, if there is any one, whose confidence in divine grace renders him less grieved and distressed with the evils of his own heart and life, and less desirous of becoming holy;—let such a one know, that, however highly he may think of himself, God looks upon him with an awful frown, and will not hear his prayers. That very grace of Christ, which he makes the foundation of his hopes, stands against him; charges him with a total opposition to its very nature and design, and threatens him with a loss of all its blessings. If there is one instance of criminality more aggravated and more abhorrent to the mind of God, than any other; it is that of the man who turns the grace of God into licentiousness; who grows quiet and bold in sin, because he knows that Christ can forgive.

SECONDLY ; Our doctrine is important in relation to *Christians, and may assist them in accounting for the fact, that their prayers are so seldom heard and answered.* The prayers, brethren, which we have offered to God, cannot be enumerated. We have often prayed that he would enlighten our minds ; that he would make us holy, harmless, and undefiled, cause all the fruits of the Spirit to abound in us. We have prayed too for the growing holiness and usefulness of Christians ; for the conversion of sinners ; for the effusion of the Holy Spirit upon our churches, and our literary and religious institutions ; and for the universal spread of the Gospel. Such prayers for ourselves and for others we have offered up hundreds, and perhaps thousands of times ; and have offered them up to that God who *heareth prayer.* And yet, where is the answer to our prayers ? Where is that growth in knowledge and grace, —that fruitfulness in good works,—that Christian humility and love, and that lustre of holiness, for which we have prayed ? Where is that abundant effusion of the Holy Spirit,—and that general conversion of sinners, —that success of Christ's ministers, and that increase of his church, for which we have so frequently besought the Lord ? Is not here something very strange ?—God has promised to hear prayer ;—the prayers of Christians constantly ascend to him for spiritual blessings ;—and yet few of those blessings are bestowed ! How shall we account for it, that, after we have been praying from day to day, and from year to year, that our minds might be “light in the Lord,” they are still so dark ?—and that after we have been praying for perfect conformity to Christ, we are still so unlike him ?—and that after we have presented so many supplications for the blessings of Heaven upon others, so few of those blessings are granted ? Has God ceased to be gracious ? Has he forgotten his promises ? Is his ear heavy that he cannot hear ? No, brethren ; the reason is not to be found in God, but in ourselves. We are chargeable with regarding iniquity in our hearts ; we are deficient in our obedience to the divine law. This is the reason, and the only reason, why God does not hear our prayers.—And, my brethren, is not this a *sufficient* reason ? Can we suppose that God will be *partial* to us, because we are his children ?—that he will have such a *fondness*, as will lead him to indulge *us* in that which he forbids to *others* ? The Scriptures teach, that if there is any thing which excites the displeasure of God more than all things else, it is the sin which he sees in his own children. If we are his children, we have been sanctified, and made the temple of God through the Holy Ghost. And how must it displease God, to see us defiling his temple ! What an insufferable offence must it be to his infinite goodness, that, after he has done so much to redeem us from iniquity and make us holy, we should ungratefully forget his goodness, and still cleave to that very iniquity, from which he has begun to deliver us !—If God looks with abhorrence upon sin in the wicked

world ; he looks upon it with double abhorrence, when found in *us*, if we are indeed his children. Unrenewed sinners do indeed sin against *conscience*. But do not *we* sin against a *clearer* conscience ? *They* sin against the light which shines around them. But *we* sin against light which shines within us. *They* violate strong obligations ; but *we* *stronger*. *They* have merely heard the name of Christ, and been invited to partake of his blessings. But *we* have seen his glory, and received of his fulness, and enjoyed fellowship with him in prayer, and at his table ; and have had our names written in heaven. Now for us, in such circumstances, to regard iniquity in our hearts, is an evil of the highest aggravation. And God will feel and manifest the highest displeasure against it. And let me freely ask, my brethren, whether God has not already manifested his displeasure, in the dreadful fact that he has not heard our prayers ? When we consider how many times we have made supplications to God for spiritual blessings, and then look on ourselves and see how we are dying for want of them ; do we not recognise the tokens of divine displeasure ? Could there be a more certain or more appalling proof of God's anger against us, than his saying ;—"When ye multiply your prayers, I will not hear." This tremendous evil is the consequence of our regarding iniquity in our hearts.

Christian brethren, this is a serious subject. Let us not pass over it lightly. Let each one for himself faithfully inquire,—*What is the particular sin, which causes the divine displeasure against me, and hinders my prayers from being heard ?* And if we would pursue this inquiry to any good purpose, let us fix our eye upon the high standard of duty exhibited in the Holy Scriptures, and make that the rule of our judgment. If we find that we allow ourselves to neglect any thing enjoined in the word of God ; or that we do any thing there forbidden ; or that we give entertainment in our hearts to any dispositions or feelings there condemned ; we shall see at once what the barrier is, which separates us from God. Let us then seriously consider the whole range of duties enjoined upon us in the Scriptures respecting God, and our fellow-creatures, and ourselves ; and by faithful self-examination determine, whether we do habitually and diligently perform these various duties.

Our attention to this subject may be rendered more profitable, if we will examine ourselves in regard to a class of duties and sins which are considered with less frequency, and are more likely to pass unnoticed ; which are so much under the veil of retirement and privacy, that our consciences are less apt to be affected by them, than by other duties and sins which are more exposed to public view. I speak now of the hidden motives which govern us in those actions, which are externally right. I speak of those thoughts and feelings, which are seen only by the eye of God. I speak of those more humble, private duties, which occur every day and every hour ; those duties which require the greatest victory over

the corrupt affections of the heart,—the greatest watchfulness, and patience, and meekness. The neglect of any of these duties, however retired from public view,—indulgence in any of these sins, though ever so small in the judgment of the world, may be highly offensive to God ; and it may be a latent poison, which will spread through our whole spiritual frame.

As what I have now hinted at is specially important, I shall turn your thoughts to a few examples.

It is the requisition of the sacred Scriptures, that we should be governed in our conduct by *love to God and love to man*. Suppose now, that, in all our actions, even when we show the greatest respect for God, and the greatest benevolence to man, we still have in our hearts an ultimate reference to *ourselves* ; and instead of seeking the welfare of our fellow-creatures, and the honor of God, do in reality make our own interest the grand object of pursuit. Is not this regarding iniquity in our hearts ? Is not supreme self-love the very essence of sin ? And while this remains unsubdued within us, will not God look upon us with abhorrence, and turn away his ear from our prayers ?

Again ; if we receive an injury from others, God requires us from the heart to forgive them, to wish them well, and to overcome evil with good. In doubtful cases, he requires us to avoid evil thoughts and suspicions, and to possess that love which hopeth all things. Suppose now, that when we receive any injury, we put the worst construction possible upon it ; that we suffer malignant passion to gain the ascendancy ; that we perpetually dwell upon the injury, whether real or imaginary, so that all kind feeling towards those who have offended us is destroyed, and dark, resentful, malicious thoughts occupy our breast. Suppose, moreover, that we go about as tale-bearers, and circulate injurious reports, true or false, for the purpose of gratifying our resentment, and blackening a character which has become the object of our dislike. Is not this iniquity ? Is there any thing more opposite to the mind of Christ—any thing more opposite to his example—than such a temper and conduct as this ? And if we indulge it, can we be so presumptuous as to think that God will hear our prayers ?

If we have injured or offended others, our Lord requires us to make ample confession and reparation. If any of our fellow Christians have aught against us, it is our *first* duty to go and be reconciled to them. The neglect of this is a sin, which will deprive us of the happiness of communion with God. There are some relative duties expressly enjoined in the Scriptures, which Christians are apt to overlook ; particularly the more appropriate duties of parents and children, husbands and wives. God is as much in earnest in those commands which prescribe our conduct in these relations, as in those which require us to love and worship Him. And if we venture, in any respect or degree, to neglect

these relative and domestic duties, which are thus divinely appointed ; we regard iniquity in our hearts, and incur the displeasure of the Almighty.

Once more : We are required not to think of ourselves above what we ought to think ; not to seek great things for ourselves ; but to be meek and lowly in heart, and to be content that our names should be unknown, if the name of our blessed Lord may be honored. Suppose now, that we entertain high thoughts of ourselves ; that we exalt ourselves above others, and complain, if we are not treated with just so much respect and honor ; that we aspire after GREATNESS instead of goodness ; that we seek the gratification of ourselves, instead of the welfare of others ; and care for our own things, not for the things of Christ. Is not such a state of mind highly offensive to God ? Can he take pleasure in us, while we cherish it ?

Let us then, brethren, examine ourselves with incessant care. For sin is a deceitful, subtle thing. It has ten thousand arts ; and all those arts are employed to hide it from our view. Under that dark veil which covers our hearts, we may perhaps find that abomination, which has caused our darkness and poverty, and rendered our prayers unavailing. God Almighty *search us, and know our hearts, and try us, and know our thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in us ; and lead us in the way everlasting.* And may we soon be able to say, we do not regard iniquity in our hearts ; the grace of God has eradicated the love of sin. And now we know that *whatsoever we ask we shall receive, because we keep his commandments, and do those things which are pleasing in his sight.*

THIRDLY ; Impenitent sinners may learn from this subject, *why God does not hear their prayers.* On this point, those who are disposed to give some attention to religion, especially those who are solicitous for their eternal happiness, often feel distressing difficulties. They are unable to account for it, that, after they have offered up so many prayers, they are not relieved from trouble, and comforted with the tokens of divine forgiveness. Sometimes they ascribe this to the want of stronger excitement of feeling, or of greater frequency or length in their prayers ; sometimes to the enormity of past sin, which they think has put them beyond the reach of redeeming love ; and sometimes, to the want of compassion in God. But these apprehensions are altogether mistaken and groundless. That the prayers of such persons are unavailing, and their souls destitute of peace, is not owing to the want of stronger excitement of feeling ; nor to the want of greater frequency or length in their prayers ; nor to the enormity of past sins ; and least of all, to any want of compassion in God. The dreadful fact, that God does not hear their prayers, is owing to this one cause,—*that they regard iniquity in*

their hearts; that their affections cleave to sin; that they dislike the service of God, and will not be bound by his holy law. It is this which bars them from the presence of God, and closes his ear to their prayers. Let them only give up their sins, and let their hearts give up the *love* of sin; and God's ear will be open to their cry. There will be no need of any tumultuous excitement of feeling;—and no need of great frequency, or length, or loudness in their prayers. God will hear the gentlest whisper. If in the secret chamber, or in the lonely walk, or on the pillow in the silence of midnight, the penitent sinner lifts up his soul to God, and says, in the softest accents, *God be merciful to me a sinner; take away all iniquity, and be my refuge and my portion*;—the God of heaven will lend a gracious ear to his supplication. Yea, God is so merciful, that he will hear *the desire* of the humble, though never uttered in words. When any are disposed to confess and forsake their sins, God graciously attends to their requests. And sometimes he anticipates their wishes, and bestows the blessings they need, before they ask for them. Thus it was with the prodigal son, when, with the language and the heart of a penitent, he returned to his father: his father's blessings came upon him faster than his requests could be offered. Such is the kindness and grace of God towards every sinner who repents. As soon as the love of sin is subdued, God comes forward in the glory of his grace, and pours into the soul a fulness of spiritual blessings.

Let then all impenitent sinners ponder well the reason, why God does not hear their prayers. *Their hearts are still wedded to sin. They still cherish in their bosoms that abominable thing which God's soul hateth.* And let them remember, that, while this is the case, they are not to expect that God will hear their prayers. He has expressly informed them, what is the condition, and the only condition, on which he will hear them. It is *a cordial readiness to confess and forsake their sins*. There is nothing they can do which will be accepted in the place of this. They may send up to God the cry of guilt and distress. They may subject themselves to watching and fasting. They may give away their goods to feed the poor. They may be willing to renounce every thing, *excepting the love of iniquity*. They may be willing to *suffer* every thing, if they may only maintain the secret league they have formed with sin. To this they cling. They will not be separated from their idols. Now faithfulness to the souls of sinners requires me to say, that while they retain such a temper of mind, they can neither do nor suffer any thing which will induce God to hear their prayers. No, my unhappy friends; you are not to look for this divine favor. A holy God can be brought into no alliance with a heart that loves what he hates. You must sacrifice the pleasures of sin, or the friendship of your Maker. You must part with sin, or part with heaven.